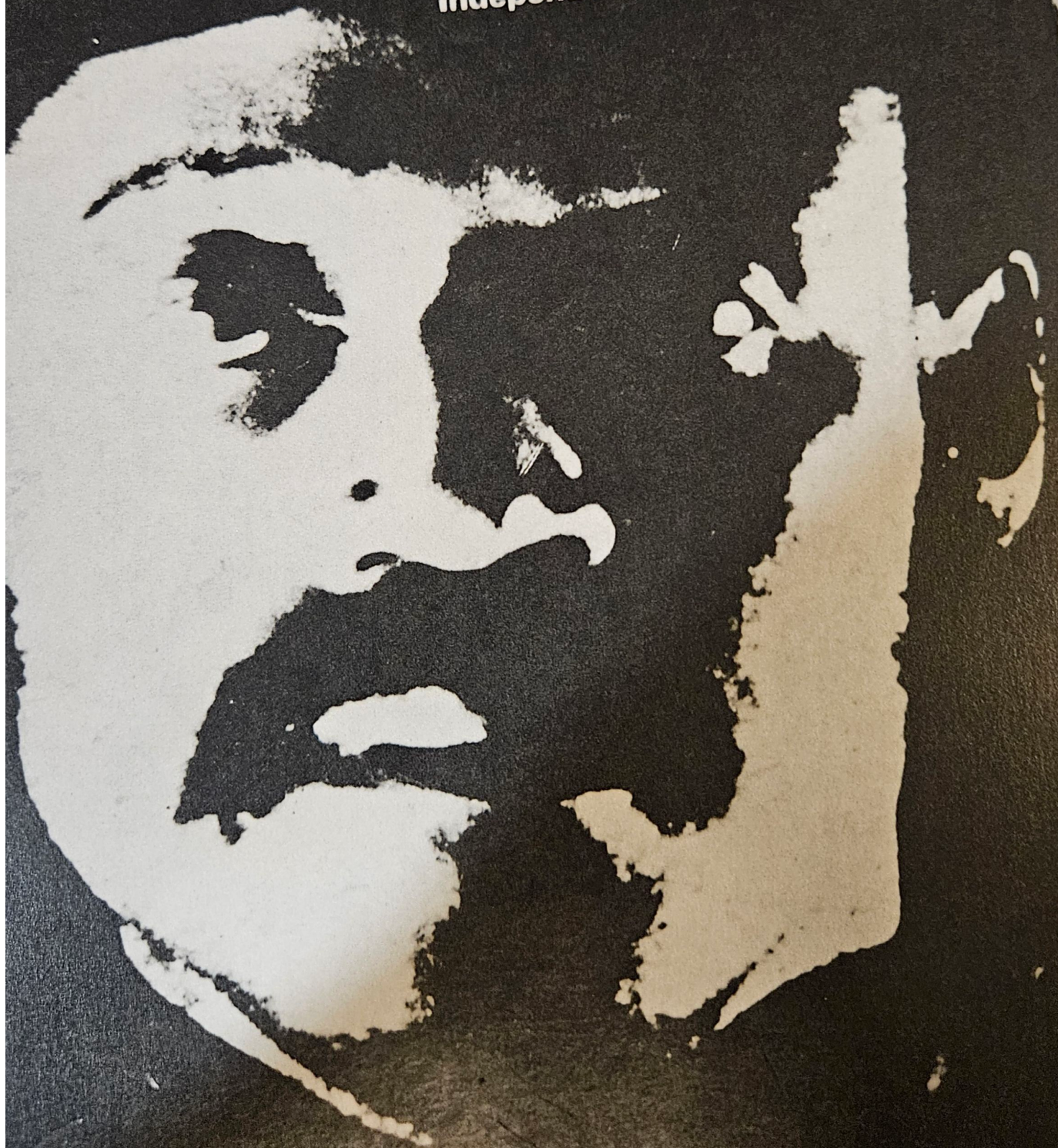


BLACK CINEMA AESTHETICS

**Issues in
Independent Black Filmmaking**



Edited by Gladstone L. Yearwood

**BLACK CINEMA AESTHETICS
ISSUES IN INDEPENDENT
BLACK FILMMAKING**

EDITED BY

GLADSTONE L. YEARWOOD

**Ohio University Papers on Afro-American,
African, and Caribbean Studies**

VATTEL T. ROSE

Series Editor

**OHIO UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES
ATHENS, OHIO**

Copyright© 1982 Center for Afro-American Studies, Ohio University

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Center for Afro-American Studies, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

Sweet, Sweetback's Baaadasssss Song and the development of The Contemporary Black Film Movement

(edited by Gladstone L. Yearwood)

Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet, Sweetback's Baaadasssss Song* was the center of much controversy when it was released in 1971. *Sweetback* was the crystallization of developments in post-World War II black cinema which differed radically from most of the work of black filmmakers between the two great World Wars. The early phase of black cinema was marked by the frequent use of middle class types as black heroes. Black cinema seemed to reflect the values, heroic ideals and cinematic models of Hollywood. The new black cinema of the nineteen seventies began a rejection of the dominance of the Hollywood cinema. Without a doubt, M. Van Peebles' *Sweetback* stands as a milestone in contemporary black cinema because of its popular impact, its example of economic independence, its fine uses of cinematic languages, and its creative incorporation of the Afro-American expressive tradition. Needless to say, there were many black-oriented and black exploitation films which used the model pioneered by Melvin Van Peebles.

Today, *Sweetback* continues to evoke much diverse commentary as to its importance to the development of contemporary black cinema, ranging from the view that the film is a seminal work in black cinema to another which finds it to be the initial statement in a barrage of films which dealt with lower class black life. What follows is a colloquy on *Sweet, Sweetback's Baaadasssss Song* and its impact on the development of contemporary black cinema. It

features the filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles in conversation with filmmakers St. Clair Bourne and Haile Gerima, film critic and program director of *Third World Newsreel*, Pearl Bowser. The colloquy took place during the spring of 1980 before an audience at Ohio University. Although the actual discussion was much longer and detailed, what follows has been edited with a view to clarifying the important aspects of the conversation.

VAN PEEBLES:

*"Once this formula
....of the black
winning and being
triumphant became
box-office,
everybody jumped
on the
bandwagon..."*

--M. Van Peebles

When *SWEETBACK* was released, only two theaters in the United States agreed to show it. I'm not talking about cities; only two theaters in the entire United States: one was a house in Detroit showing triple feature zombie movies and the other was, of all places, in Atlanta, Georgia. I had just left Detroit two days before and those brothers and sisters in Detroit were throwin' popcorn and hotdogs...yeah...and screaming! When I went to Georgia, I went into the theater in the middle of the film, and I expected the theater to be roaring. There was not a sound. I didn't understand, and I quietly crept down the aisle. I took a seat where this old black lady was sitting in front of me. And she said: "Oh, Lord, let him die. Don't let them kill him." we were so used to out people losing in film that she could not believe he was going to get away with it; but she had an affinity for the character and at least she wanted to let him die. The most you could hope for was that he died on his own steam, that he did not die by their hands.

Well, after the first showing, people filed out of the theater very quietly. You have to understand this is Deep South; and they'd just opened a topless bar right next door. There were a couple bloods who went into this topless bar with one black dancer among many white ones; and they stood there being quiet...sort of just looking. They'd learned not to look up. This was the South, so they'd learned not to show their emotions. But by the next showing of *SWEETBACK* the lines were all around the block. By the third show it was just like Detroit. People were screaming, walking out with their pride.

Once this formula, that is, of the black winning and being triumphant became box office, everybody jumped on the band-wagon. Originally, the script of *SHAFT* was written for a white actor, but they changed it to a black. They threw in a couple 'motherfuckers' and that became a black film. There's a scene in *SHAFT*--if you will remember, that they neglected to delete from the script, which made no sense for a black character. Shaft comes out of a hotel and hails a cab; the cab goes past, and he's surprised; he's confounded; but this was written when the guy was white. If you're black in New York and you put up your hand for a cab, you just jump back, unless you're going to get run over. They hadn't even bothered to change that, so it became a complete non sequitur.

"The dominant culture has one immense weak spot --an Achilles' pocketbook."

--M. Van Peebles

However, there was a problem. You could not have a "bad nigger" winning--at least not 'bad' in terms of a black revolutionary consciousness and of the street. They were faced with a difficult problem: how to make that acceptable. The problem was that there was a lot of money to be made. You have to understand the power structure. The dominant culture has one immense weak spot--an Achilles' pocketbook. If you can show how they can make bread, they're going to try and get to it some way. So they came to a very brave idea. They took the black: let him dress in leather and let him talk tough to a few whites; but he always worked with the power structure. So therefore he became a counter-revolutionary product.

GERIMA:

*Exactly what was the revolutionary aspect of the film *SWEETBACK* in relation to the barrage of black exploitation films?*

BOURNE:

***SWEETBACK** was the revolutionary aspect but Hollywood took that character, de-sexed him and made him an extension of the establishment by making him have the badge as in *CLEOPATRA JONES*.*

"Sweetback was revolutionary but Hollywood took that character, desexed him and made him an extension of the establishment by making him have the badge as in CLEOPATRA JONES."

--St. Clair Bourne

"It was an important moment in the evolution of black cinema which involved a redefinition and initial statement to act against one's fate in America."

--St. Clair Bourne

GERIMA:

Could you clarify the revolutionary aspect of that character?

BOURNE:

The theme of the character is very similar to developments in many African films in the sense that one finds the dawning of a political consciousness; and at the end a willingness to act on behalf of one's community. In the beginning, SWEETBACK was essentially a classic example of the exploited. He was a player in a small arena of "fun" for the white power structure, even though the clients were black. When the police were taking him down to book him, he really didn't make a commitment; but when they began to beat up the brother that he didn't even know, he moved to action. Later in the movie he said, "This is our teacher; We've gotta protect this guy." And then his willingness to aid in the struggle; his attempt and eventual success in escaping, provide further examples of the progressive elements of the character. At that time, it was one of the first African-American films that, in effect, showed the growth and the development of a political consciousness. It was an important moment in the evolution of black cinema which involved redefinition and initial statement of a willingness to act against one's fate in America.

GERIMA:

Then, how do you account for the widespread adverse criticism which SWEETBACK encountered in the black community?

BOURNE:

The thing is that there is the element of class within the black community. This is very important, because every class doesn't serve the same interests, doesn't have the same goals in society. The ways particular class interests perceive themselves in the world are different, and there is going to be a struggle for the hegemony of these views. Now, the

way you perceive art and cultural information is going to be influenced by your class interests. A lot of the criticism launched against SWEETBACK came from middle class writers.

BOWSER:

The fact that SWEETBACK was popular or that there was criticism in the black community about SWEETBACK do not really get at the heart of the problem. The crucial problem--the core of so much criticism of SWEETBACK--was that it was a very painful experience for the black community to look at. And that has not to do with whether the film is good or bad; it has to do with, for the first time, on that 10-foot screen--in a public movie house--one is looking at very, very painful characters in our community.

"...The most you could hope for was that he died on his own steam, that he did not die by their hands."

--M. Van Peebles

GERIMA:

Let us talk about exploitation of the black images: in movies there was Amos 'n Andy doing their nonsensical buffoonery; there was Tarzan in Africa who gives a scream and all the animals come running. We all agree that is exploitation. Is it also not exploitation when you talk about black films perpetuating this same kind of negativity? Mr. Van Peebles has waged a very important economic struggle to produce his film. It's a very tough struggle to wage; but then we have to be historical about it. Black filmmakers have failed us in the development of positive images. Oscar Micheaux provided a decadent solution to the question of black beauty. His films glorify the standards of white beauty in black cinema, although he was very profound and revolutionary in distribution and production. He even mobilized white folks to invest in his films. That's a revolutionary act for the time and for that scene. But just because I'm engulfed in my emotions, I would not neglect to say that those characters do not oppress black people--the darker people, the darker aspects of my people. Micheaux's films

used a white criteria of beauty to oppress black women and furthered the victimization of black and poor people. So I look at his work on the one hand admiringly; yet at the same time, I have to criticize because there are certain problems in these films.

BOWSER:

The criticism of Micheaux has more to do with his not wanting to deal with these aspects of black life and the obvious emphasis on the middle class type characters. However, in reference to SWEETBACK, one comment that came out in the criticism of the film was that "I don't want to look at prostitutes raping little boys." That aspect of the black community responding to a film such as SWEETBACK is very, very important. The movie is not reality; the characters are largely overdrawn. The idea that this kind of thing does happen in the black community is not that far fetched. I grew up in Harlem in World War II, and prostitution was rampant then. It was not unusual for a teenage boy to find his manhood in a house of prostitution. I lived in an apartment house where the prostitutes worked out of the ground floor. It was public information that these things were going on. Now, that's a very painful thing to experience. But during the war years there were other things which were much more painful; so even living in the same building, we could turn our backs on it and say, "Well, it doesn't really exist; it will go away." This street I am talking about was rampant with prostitution and the things that went on were not that unrelated to some of the concepts you witnessed in SWEETBACK. But the problem I have is to what extent the filmmaker can depict that kind of graphic reality; and how does the depiction of that reality affect social attitudes in the black community.

"The reality is that black men are wasted in the streets. They die everyday because they go about their lives and freedom in a cowboy way."

--Haile Gerima

VAN PEEBLES:

The filmmaker doesn't create the reality; it exists and its killing us. In order to do anything about it,

"...The problem... is to what extent the filmmaker can depict...reality; and how does the depiction of that graphic reality affect social attitudes...?"

--Pearl Bowser

"As a filmmaker, I'm not an anthology for blacks. You don't ask Pushkin why he doesn't sound like Dostoevsky or Tolstoi."

--M. Van Peebles

we first of all have to acknowledge that it exists; and then show the effects it has on our people, show our people struggling against it; and package it in a form that will get their attention. My task as a filmmaker is to communicate to the people. You do not do this in ways they cannot understand but above all you can't let them sit...and have pity for themselves; you can't make them feel superior either. You must challenge them, their perceptions, their ways of doing things and the whole idea of movies as one kind of entertainment. Sweetback was a new kind of black character on the screen dealing differently with a common set of historical circumstances.

GERIMA:

Now, that brother Sweetback, who was made to escape with his penis, is not a new black man on the screen at all, unless he missed history. When black people, who don't have much money make a movie, they should make movies that uplift our people intellectually. We should not be shadow-boxing. Mr. Van Peebles' film totally diverted the issue. I respect him. As a black man, he is able to make films; but, in his film's content, he reveals a false manhood. Sweetback oppresses women of all colors.

VAN PEEBLES:

The problem here is that you are confusing the possibility of direct political action with the limitations and possibilities of the cinema. I fully agree with your view that black films should be uplifting; however, a film cannot be very successful if it is didactic. The film is a carefully constructed series of elements with meanings which are more symbolic and metaphoric than literal.

GERIMA:

Instead of beating up one policeman, I would like to see you deal with the system. Dealing with one policeman inside a uniform never answers our

people's problems. It is an individual action; what we need is action in the form of mass movements.

VAN PEEBLES:

I agree with you. We obviously start at two different points in time. I saw the film as an evolution in understanding,....from an uncritical character--a guy willing to go along with the cops at first--to a progression in which he develops the consciousness, the sentiment and the humanity you spoke of. That sentiment and humanity occur despite him, not because of him, but despite him; and that sentiment and humanity which develops in the character is that of a love existing in the community for a fellow man of suffering. This allowed him to kick the two cops' asses who beat up his brother. Now that for me is humanity. I'm only talking basic, urban renewal. This is the same man who a little later had enough understanding--though slowly--to take care of business when he had to.

I used to know this fellow who would give these wonderful lectures; and every time he got to the punch line, he would give it in Swahili. That's great, but everybody doesn't speak Swahili...The revolutionary filmmaker has to deal with the real material conditions of society at that particular level of consciousness. I took a guy from where I was at, how I started out; and tried to trace an evolution which didn't happen for the right reason. It happened for the wrong reason. When the cops took him in the first place, he should have said, "Hey no...I ain't gonna go." That's nice. But what else is new? That and fifty cents will get you a subway token. That ain't the way it happens. And I prefer to deal with it the way it comes down.

Independent filmmakers don't normally collect their money. I collected mine. I didn't collect my money through theoretical manifestoes...Now when I wanted to do the film, I would have rather done a film such as the one on Fred Hampton, the Panther brother in Chicago, or BUSH MAMA...fantastic

"...Our people have been brainwashed with the music, the beautiful color and the dancing images flickering across the screen."

--M. Van Peebles

film....KILLER OF SHEEP....good film. But the reality is that our people have been brainwashed with the 'hip' music, the beautiful color, and the dancing images flickering across the screen. This is what they know as cinema. And that's where we must begin. We obviously cannot dwell there; but it's a point of departure.

"Oscar Micheaux provided a decadent solution to the question of black beauty. His films glorify the standards of white beauty in black cinema, although he was very profound and revolutionary in production and distribution."

--Haile Gerima

That's what revolution is! It isn't everybody standing up here on an intellectual high. And it is not meeting the people and starting from where they are not. It is starting from where they can see...from where I started, from where the brother started. SWEETBACK didn't start from where, maybe, you wanted to start; but he started from where I started from. And I've got scars all over me....But I learned, and I think a man can learn. And when he said, "Take that brother, he's our future;" he learned something very important.

I would have loved to have taken the equipment, put a podium here and discussed the didactic tactics of Martin Luther King as opposed to Malcolm-X, or the general problems of finance facing black institutions. Great! That and fifty cents will get me a subway token. How about the film on Malcolm-X and all those other movies? Where are they now?

GERIMA:

Now, why wouldn't your brother, the character in the film, have that same kind of calculation in terms of the immediate satisfaction versus the long-run gains? For example, in Washington, D.C., many times I have been confronted with a dangerous situation without having to commit violence. Someone would attack me or a policeman would aggress on me and my instinct is to kill a person. But I always say that my ability to make films and create is more revolutionary than for me to get my satisfaction out of killing one white policeman. I'm asking you, why would the character have to deal with one policeman and not attack the entire system?

VAN PEEBLES:

That's right; but this is one particular character. You must understand that this is not an anthology, but one slice of life. This is one man and the way he reacts. In AINT SUPPOSED TO DIE A NATURAL DEATH, that idea becomes much clearer. There are nineteen different slices of life; different people who react in different ways. But this is merely one character motivated by specific historical moments.

GERIMA:

The reality is that black men are wasted in the streets. They die everyday because they go about their lives and their freedom in a cowboy way.

VAN PEEBLES:

No, no, no, no...SWEETBACK is not an anthology of black men. Let me illustrate by telling a short story: Once a sheriff in the South had twelve blacks in a cell; and they had all been condemned to death. The next morning he was going to execute them. But he didn't want to use up twelve bullets....didn't want to waste the time. He hit upon a perfect scheme. He went in to the cells and said, "look boys, y'know, everybody's gonna die tomorrow morning and so on.....; but, I've talked to the cook at the restaurant next door and we gonna give you one fine all-time soul food dinner, hmm? But there's a problem, we can only have one menu." The twelve prisoners raised their voices. One said naturally, "I want blackeyed peas and pigtails." Another shouted, "naw, black is chitterlings and stuff like that." They all got into a fight and killed themselves."

As a filmmaker, I'm not an anthology for blacks. You don't ask pushkin why he doesn't sound like Dostoevsky or Tolstoi.

"The crucial problem--the core of so much criticism of Sweetback--was that it was a very painful experience for the black community to look at that film."

--Pearl Bowser

Now, there's an interesting question which came up concerning *SWEETBACK* and women, in particular, the negative portrayal of women. How about this little old black woman; so old, she's already gone senile and she's still taking care of all those children? How about the black singer who knew where Sweetback was and wouldn't tell? She knew enough to run a game. That's positive. Now, if she had said, "Well now, Officer, I know where he is and I won't say," he would have beaten her until last year; and she would have eventually told. I'm talking about dealing with reality where you have to deal with it.

BOWSER:

I could agree with you, if you then said that your films, all of them, are personal statements because there is a consistency in the way in which you present women. Can you make a film which is not true to your personal tastes? Can you make a film which deals with larger issues and larger conceptions of individuals...?

VAN PEEBLES:

But there is another kind of world out there which you're not looking at; which is what I think is the value of being able to criticize a film such as *SWEETBACK* without having the filmmaker feel that he is exploring reality only and there is no other reality. There is another reality. You may not be able to see it and comprehend it at that moment.

We place an exorbitant amount of weight on black film. Because there are so few of them, we always want them to mirror so many of our aspirations. This is understandable but it is also unfortunate, because all these stories cannot often be adequately told in the language of the cinema. The cinema cannot fully portray real life; but does this through its own cinematic languages.

"...Film doesn't always have to arouse people; but they must always make you--as a human being--think. They should never disengage our thinking faculties."

--Haile Gerima

GERIMA:

The important thing is to be constructive. A flower may bloom at the end of a film. That may be a very humanist film. Thus, film doesn't always have to arouse people; but they must always make you--as a human being--think. They should never disengage our thinking faculty. The way film is structured should make us think about life and also uplift us in the process. We should see the traps and pitfalls of the character's destiny.

ple
tics."

Peebles

But black people expect more from the black filmmaker. Because their humanity has been denied historically. Black folks expect more from their artists. Black filmmakers must always answer to black people.

It is not that you can't have a black servant in a film; but your black servant should have all the qualities of a human being because we are used to a sexless, lifeless, imitation-of-life character. That is why we have to be extra critical. We are the people who created jazz music; and we're capable of doing jazz cinema. And I am not arguing for one special kind of film for the imagination and creative aspirations of black people should be put into film. This diversifies liberation and liberates us in the process.

But the biggest problem I have with the film is the kind of hero it develops; and the nineteen sixties and seventies was a period when this kind of hero became popular on the screen. Along with this, there were actual brothers on the street living out that kind of reality.

VAN PEEBLES:

Brute strength without intelligence is not the answer. Sometimes you have to know when to step back, when to retreat, when to move forward. It's all simple guerilla tactics. I think Frederick Douglass said it all: "A slave ain't supposed to die a natural death."